

CONSULTATION SUBMISSION

Consultation on the design of the UK's future research assessment system

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SECTION ONE: PURPOSES OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

1. In addition to enabling the allocation of research funding and providing accountability for public investment in research, which purposes should a future UK research assessment exercise fulfil? Select all that apply.

a. Provide benchmarking information

b. Provide an evidence base to inform strategic national priorities

c. Provide an evidence base for HEIs and other bodies to inform decisions on resource allocation

d. Create a performance incentive for HEIs.

2. What, if any, additional purposes should be fulfilled by a future exercise?

A future exercise should be constructed so it does not penalise universities with an emerging and developing research environment. Smaller and/or modern universities play a vital role in the UK research eco-system, and the introduction of any further measures which disproportionately only rewards those institutions operating at scale should be avoided.

A future exercise should be constructed to minimise as far as possible the negative impact of the exercise on research culture and research careers. It should be mindful to allow for recognition/measurement of 'quality' research in different forms.

A future exercise should be constructed so as to support collaboration between HEIs, rather than drive competition between them. MillionPlus advocates that the positive benefits in this regard brought by the portability rules introduced for REF 2021 should be maintained for the next exercise.

3. Could any of the purposes be fulfilled via an alternative route? If yes, please provide further explanation.

Some form of assessment of the research and impact itself is required to inform the allocation of funding rather than, for example, solely allocating QR resources on the basis of metrics. MillionPlus would, however, welcome a future exercise being less bureaucratic. This could be achieved by every effort being made in the guidance to reduce the repetition of information already submitted/available elsewhere (e.g. via DOI). Research England should consider harmonising data required for future assessments with HESA submissions. The early and consistent publication of the guidance would also go some way to achieving this. Please see suggestions in our response to questions 25 for more detail on how we feel this could be achieved.

4. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the purposes of a future research assessment system?

The assessment should focus on the quality of research output, rather than input – i.e. assess research outputs and impact, rather than some aspects of the environment which are inputs. For instance, institutions are already given credit for some aspects of the REF environment data (research income/PGR completions) and by rewarding these successes again in the REF it widens sector inequalities (i.e. smaller institutions without access to DTPs will fall further behind). Whilst MillionPlus recognises that the REF cannot itself address the inequalities in the sector, we strongly believe that it should avoid deepening them through concentration of QR funding and a narrow focus on measures of excellence.

MillionPlus would advocate for the research assessment process to provide opportunities for collaboration and international recognition of the contribution of UK research to global challenges. We recommend the creation of a national repository for research where people submit outputs and case studies around UN SDGs.

SECTION TWO: SETTING PRIORITIES

5. To what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 9 (least important)

- a. Ability of the system to promote research with wider socio-economic impact. **5**
- b. Comparability of assessment outcomes (across institutions, disciplines and/or assessment exercises) **2**
- c. Ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate **3**
- d. Impact of the assessment system on local/regional development **9**
- e. Impact of the system on research culture **4**
- f. Impact of the system on the UK research system's international standing **6**
- g. Maintaining continuity with REF 2021 **7**
- h. Providing early confirmation of the assessment framework and guidance **8**
- i. Robustness of assessment outcomes **1**

6. Relating to research culture, to what extent should the funding bodies be guided by the following considerations in developing the next assessment system? Please rank the considerations from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important)

- a. Impact of the assessment system on research careers: **3**
- b. Impact of the assessment system on equality, diversity and inclusion: **2**
- c. Ability of the assessment system to promote collaboration (across institutions, sectors and/or nations) **4**
- d. Impact of the system on inter- and transdisciplinary research **5**
- e. Impact of the system on open research **6**
- f. Impact of the system on research integrity **1**

7. What, if any, further considerations should influence the development of a future assessment system? Please set out the considerations and indicate where they should be located in the list of priorities.

MillionPlus advocates for an assessment process that has a robust analysis, but also recognises that excellence takes many forms and allows research to flourish. We advocate that consideration be given to responsible use of metrics in a future exercise.

8. How can a future UK research assessment system best support a positive research culture?

The role of a research assessment system should be to assess research, rather than assessing other related issues such as research culture. Institutions should have proper processes and policies in place to support a positive research culture. However, MillionPlus recognises the impact and role the REF plays in shaping wider research culture. We would welcome a future REF taking steps in setting the guidance to disincentivise practices which lead to a negative research culture (e.g., precarity). We are also supportive of measures the REF guidance can take to incentivise positive research culture within HEIs with regards to their support for ECRs, and EDI issues. Similarly, interdisciplinarity is a product of positive research culture and should be supported in a future exercise.

We welcomed the flexibility in REF 2021 to submit between 1-5 outputs per person, believing this to be positive for research culture. We would support a future assessment being at a unit and/or institutional level, rather than reverting back to the greater focus on individuals as previous exercises (e.g. 4 outputs per person as in REF 2014).

SECTION THREE: IDENTIFYING RESEARCH EXCELLENCE

9. Which of the following elements should be recognised and rewarded as components of research excellence in a future assessment exercise?

(Multiple options: 'Should be heavily weighted' – 'Should be moderately weighted' – 'Should be weighted less heavily' – 'Should not be assessed' – 'Don't know')

- a. Research inputs (e.g. research income, internal investment in research and in researchers) **less heavily**
- b. Research process (e.g. open research practices, collaboration, following high ethical standards) **not be assessed**
- c. Outputs (e.g. journal articles, monographs, patents, software, performances, exhibitions, datasets) **heavily weighted**
- d. Academic impact (contribution to the wider academic community through e.g. journal editorship, mentoring, activities that move the discipline forward) **less heavily**
- e. Engagement beyond academia: **moderately**
- f. Societal and economic impact: **heavily weighted**
- g. Other (please specify): **Quantitative measures around research culture, and support for researchers**

10. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the components of research excellence?

The focus of a future exercise should be on the quality of the research outputs, not the associated governance. Ethics, integrity and open research compliance are governed through alternative processes and should be taken as a given, not assessed in any future REF. These are covered by existing mechanisms and conditions.

With regards to academic impact, it is unclear within this consultation question whether this refers to esteem indicators, impact upon pedagogy or contribution to the research environment.

As noted above, some aspects of the research environment (REF4 data) are already rewarded, and should not be double counted through the REF.

11. Are the current REF assessment criteria for outputs clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know)

- a. Originality **YES**
- b. Significance **YES**
- c. Rigour **YES**

12. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing outputs?

No

13. Are the current REF assessment criteria for impact clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know)

- a. Reach **NO**
- b. Significance **YES**

14. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing impact?

Due to the unique nature of all impact case studies, and significant differences between the types of case studies that were submitted in different disciplines in REF 2014 (which was the only 'real' reference point for the 2021 exercise) we found it difficult to interpret the guidance in relation to reach and significance, and to benchmark and assess draft case studies against the guidance. This was particularly so for 'reach'. While REF makes clear that reach should not be considered in geographical terms, nor in terms of absolute numbers of beneficiaries, this is not well understood in the sector. There is a hesitancy in the sector on submitting (or more importantly pursuing) work that is very focused but makes a big impact on the target beneficiaries.

The requirement that the underpinning research had to be undertaken at the institution submitting the case study, disadvantages Early Career Researchers who often move around frequently and disadvantages institutions which employ higher levels of Early Career Researchers.

Because of the unique nature of all case studies, MillionPlus does not believe that the criteria should be overly prescriptive. It should be recognised that some institutions have achieved significant impact with modest QR resources.

15. Are the current REF assessment criteria for environment clear and appropriate? (Yes/No/Don't know)

- a. Vitality **NO**
- b. Sustainability **YES**

16. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the criteria for assessing environment?

Rather than 'vitality', which is not clear, MillionPlus would suggest that 'dynamic, supportive, inclusive and diverse' expresses better what we think is the sense of 'vitality'.

There is a challenge for research assessment process to appropriately compare environments across the sector, where scale, level of resource and socio-economic context can vary enormously. The preparation of environment templates can also be burdensome for smaller institutions who have limited academic capacity and research support. We would suggest reducing requirements for environment statement submissions for smaller institutions could be considered.

It can also be difficult for smaller institutions to be confident in their submissions due to the relative capacity to invest in research areas and to navigate competing institutional priorities. Due to this situation, there is a real risk of the REF deepening existing inequalities within the sector. Future research assessment processes should offer guidance to provide transparency about how considerations of institutional context and scale are integrated into the process and assessment.

MillionPlus would also suggest the geographical position of the HEIs should be considered, where regional socioeconomic context can impact significantly on HEI strategy and activities. This could be incorporated into a scored institutional environment narrative statement, if one is introduced for a future exercise. Whilst the REF cannot have responsibility for levelling up, it should wherever possible avoid deepening existing geographical inequalities.

SECTION FOUR: ASSESSMENT PROCESSES

17. When considering the frequency of a future exercise, should the funding bodies prioritise:

- a. stability
- b. currency of information
- c. **both a. and b.**
- d. neither a. nor b.
- e. Don't know.

18. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the prioritisation of stability vs. currency of information?

If effort could be reduced at each exercise, greater frequency would have a positive impact on the sector to more effectively reward changing performance (and reduce burden).

A more frequent assessment cycle would also measure emerging research areas in a timely manner. More frequent REF assessments may also positively impact on early career researcher careers.

19. Should a future exercise take place on a rolling basis?

- a. Yes, split by main panel
- b. Yes, split by assessment element (e.g. outputs, impact, environment)
- c. **No**
- d. Don't know.

20. Do you have any further comments to make regarding conducting future research assessment exercises on a rolling basis?

A rolling basis would generate extra administrative pressures on institutions, in particular for smaller institutions who do not have people dedicated to REF.

It would be possible for QR-based impact funding to be disaggregated and case studies submitted on more of a rolling basis, and we would be open to this possibility being explored in more depth.

21. At what level of granularity should research be assessed in future exercises?

- a. Individual

- b. Unit of Assessment based on disciplinary areas
- c. **Unit of Assessment based on self-defined research themes**
- d. Institution
- e. Combination of b. and d.
- f. Combination of c. and d.
- g. Other (please specify)

22. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the granularity of assessment in a future research assessment exercise?

MillionPlus would welcome investigation of the self-defined research themes but recognize this would need significant work to review the practicalities. However, as a concept, flexibility in how institutions structure and plan our research strategy in line with their research capability may be helpful. Institutional assessment could be helpful for reducing the burden, however may not allow the recognition of pockets of excellence where they exist.

23. To what extent and for what purpose(s) should quantitative indicators be used in future assessment exercises? (Please select as many as apply)

- a. Move to an entirely metrics-based assessment
- b. Replace peer review with standardised metrics for:
 - i. Outputs
 - ii. Impact
- c. Environment
- d. Use standardised metrics to inform peer review of:
 - i. Outputs
 - ii. Impact
- e. Environment
- f. Should not be used at all.
- g. **Other (please specify):**

Retain as it is. UOAs that want to use metrics to inform peer review for outputs can continue to have access to this information but leave the rest (where metrics are not appropriate) as they are.

24. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the use of metrics in a future research assessment exercise?

Standardised metrics should not be used in impact assessment at all, they would serve only to further narrow perceptions of legitimate impact. They would also deepen sector-wide inequalities by further rewarding activities that can be done at scale. It may also disincentivise particular pathways to impact e.g. public engagement.

Environment metrics currently used, e.g. research income, PGR completions, are input measures rather than assessing the excellence of research and so should not be used.

It may be appropriate in some disciplines to use metrics to inform peer review of outputs but fundamentally it should be the quality of research that is assessed rather than any citation data.

25. How might a future UK research assessment exercise ensure that the bureaucratic burden on individuals and institutions is proportionate?

The administrative burden of the exercise is down to the REF guidance, not the interpretation of these and HEIs in implementing them. HEI's responses to the guidance is motivated by managing the risk of poor REF performance. MillionPlus considers the administrative burden posed by REF 2021 to be disproportionate relative to the amount of funding distributed by the exercise.

We believe simple measure can be taken to reduce the administrative burden of a future exercise. These include:

- Publication of the guidelines and requirements at an early as possible stage (including for example Open Access requirements), giving HEIs time to plan. Guidance should only be changed or added to at a later stage if absolutely necessary for the integrity of the exercise.
- Keep all guidance in one place. Do not put key information in different documents, such as letters to the head of HEIs or 'additional guidance' in different places on the REF website.
- REF team to take all possible steps to reduce the duplication of information already held, or already submitted as part of the exercise (for e.g. information linked to DOI/HESA data already submitted).
- Be very careful about trying to use the REF to 'fix' other areas of the sector (e.g. open access) unless fundamental to the robustness of the exercise outcomes.
- Do not 'trial' extra - and burdensome - aspects of the exercise to see if they may work in future (e.g. institutional environment pilot).
- Consider in real depth whether a process is really needed for the robust running of the exercise, for e.g., staff circumstances process was not needed in REF 2021 given the flexibility introduced by the 1-5 outputs requirement. (NB the removal of minimum of 1 process was needed).
- Clearer guidance on presenting non-standard outputs to be provided from the start.
- To consider lessons learnt to improve technical compatibility of a future REF submission system with an API.
- We advocate that representatives from the researchers-community and research managers (and librarians) be involved more directly in the guidance setting phases to sense check the burden of proposals.